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Book Review: A Union Woman in Civil War Kentucky: The Diary of Frances Peter

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A Union Woman in Civil War Kentucky: The Diary of Frances Peter. Ed. John David Smith and William Cooper, Jr. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 222 pp.
A Review
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This book provides a first person account of life in a border state from Jan., 1862, to April, 1864. This updated edition includes additional diary entries and notations to the first edition of 1976, and an introduction that provides the view of the new editors. Though the entries are not daily, sometimes leaving gaps of time which are not accounted for, and some are as brief as two lines, a reader finds a vivid picture of life in a city where both factions, Union and Confederate, found supporters in the civilian population. Miss Peter speaks of neighbors who are openly secessionists, or "secesh" as she calls them, and others who are believed to be, even to some who are involved in hiding Confederates in their homes and sending and receiving messages when Lexington was under Union control. That control changed hands three times, from Union to Confederate and back again, and one senses the tension Miss Peter and her family felt under Confederate control in a way that is reminiscent to this reader of World War II movies about areas in France, Scandinavia and Italy occupied by the German army.

Though only eighteen years old at the time of the first entries, Miss Peter provides a maturity that belies her age. But war ages people, young people especially. She speaks with compassion of the pitiful condition of some Confederate troops, some brought to Lexington as prisoners and later of some Union troops as well. But her strong, unflinching Union loyalties are evident throughout. She speaks of being offended by the raucous behavior of Confederate troops while they occupied Lexington and of their lack of discipline. She reports several episodes of troops verbally mistreating local people, and of thievery by small groups of them.

Also obvious is her racism. She speaks at times with negative feelings of the conscription of black troops from freed and runaway slaves, due to her conviction about their limitations. At other times, she speaks with contempt of, what she perceives, as their misbehavior, especially drinking and partying. Also interesting is her response to the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, in an entry dated Monday, January 26, 1863:

"Mr. Marshall in the Legislature made a very sensible speech the other day about all this disputing over the Presidents (sic) Proclamation. He says he thinks it is enough for the Governor and Legislature to declare it unconstitutional and not meddle any further but leave the matter alone . . ."

Later, on February 4, she speaks more specifically in her own voice:

"From all I have observed of the negro he is much too averse to work, too timid to make a good soldier, and has got it into his head that liberty means doing nothing. I think it is acting against the Constitution to make soldiers of the blacks, and however much the abolitionists may say to the contrary, they will find in the end that this arming & equipping of negro regiments is a mere waste of time and money . . ."

It is interesting to speculate as to who influenced Miss Peter's opinions, since the editors state, in a note following the entry, that Miss Peter's father, a prominent local physician, did not share it: "In contrast to his daughter's explicit racism, Dr. Peter resigned from Lexington City Council when it denied blacks proper educational facilities." But Miss Peter often speaks of newspapers from Cincinnati, for example, that were in her home, so her opinions were not dominated by her father. Also interesting is the fact that though the editors state that Miss Peter was limited by epilepsy, of which she died at twenty-one, and the confinement to home it subjected her to, and the restriction of Victorian values imposed on women of her day, Miss Peter never mentions either. Also surprising, perhaps is the almost total absence of mention of family members or the family life in which she lived, except for references to her father's public life.

Though much of what Miss Peter describes as fact is actually rumor and gossip, the many notes by the editors clarify the accuracy of much of her reporting and specifically identify people mentioned. Some of this information is surprising, at least to this reader. Perhaps the best example is in the entry dated April 4, 1863, in which the diarist describes a letter in the newspaper from a man recently returned from France. He reports that a letter was received by Napoleon signed by 73 men, including Jefferson Davis, his cabinet members and a number of senators. The letter requests recognition of the Confederacy and when independence is achieved, a plan is proposed by which all white non-landowners would be sent north and a nobility created of landowners:

"And the slaves would take the place of peasants thus forming the strongest kind of a nobility since the peasant would be separated from his lord by color and race." It would be interesting to know Napoleon's response to the idea.

Though the notes may seem at times excessive, the new edition provides an intimate view of the difficulties of citizens in a border state where both sides of the conflict were often sharing the same space, if not the same view.